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ABSTRACT

Relevant policy issues for early childhood special education (ECSE) programs to consider in the areas of exit decision making and follow-up procedures are identified in this report. These issues were generated through extensive naturalistic case studies of four ECSE programs located in urban, suburban, and rural communities and were selected to reflect a variety of approaches to ECSE programming. Data analysis indicated that the child's age is the most frequently used criterion in exit decisions, apparently influenced by very limited educational options for kindergarten and primary level handicapped children. Most programs used team approaches to make the exit decision, and some programs also conducted follow-up studies to evaluate students' progress. Guidelines for exit decision making and follow-up procedures conclude the report. (Author/CB)

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University of Minnesota

RESEARCH REPORT #14

POLICY ANALYSIS OF EXIT DECISIONS AND FOLLOW-UP PROCEDURES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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Camilla A. Lehr, Patrick J. O'Sullivan, and Paula A. Nania

EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSESSMENT PROJECT

September, 1986

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Abstract

Relevant policy issues for early childhood special education programs to consider in the areas of exit decision making and follow-up procedures are identified in this report. These issues were generated through extensive naturalistic case studies of four early childhood special education programs located in urban, suburban, and rural communities, and selected to reflect a variety of approaches to early childhood special education programming. Guidelines for exit decision making and follow-up procedures conclude the report.

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Policy Analysis of Exit Decisions and Follow-Up Procedures in Early Childhood Special Education Programs

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Most early childhood special education programs were started in the past decade. The number and variety of programs continues to grow as, in response to Public Law 99-457, many states extend their services to children age birth through three. The rapid expansion of early childhood special education has allowed little time to carry out analyses of issues related to assessment and decision making for handicapped children prior to school entrance.

During the past two years, the Early Childhood Assessment Project has collected survey data, statewide and nationwide, to help fill this gap. In this project, a survey was distributed to programs across the United States to determine the extent to which written exit criteria exist (Thurlow, Lehr, & Ysseldyke, 1986). "Exit" refers to the process of formally demitting a student from the special education program because the program is no longer considered appropriate for his/her educational needs. The importance of this is two-fold. First, to the extent that children are retained in special education longer than necessary, they may be deprived of a more appropriate regular education setting. Conversely, to the extent that children are exited from the program before they are ready, they may fail in the next educational environment. Survey results based on responses from 178 school districts suggested that districts nationwide are struggling with this issue. Only about one-half of the surveyed districts had written exit criteria. Overall, considerable

variability exists in the way exit decisions are made, although chronological age is the most commonly cited criterion.

Except for selected cost-benefit efficacy studies of related day care or preschool programs (cf. Weber, Foster, & Wiekert, 1978), few districts across the United States have examined the efficacy of their programs by following graduates of early childhood special education. These districts have looked at how children placed in handicapped programs as preschoolers have progressed in school several years following program exit. For example, children in the Montgomery County Public Schools in Rockville, Maryland (Cody, 1985) were followed for three to nine years after initial placement in preschool special education. Overall findings included the following: (a) 87% of the preschoolers continued to receive special services up to nine years after initial identification, and (b) children identified only as speech impaired were less likely to need intensive special education at the end of the follow-up period.

Results of a follow-up evaluation of the Houston Parent-Child Development Center (Johnson & Walker, undated), a program designed "to promote the school competence of low-income and minority children," are less clear. Overall, the program reported success in reducing the number of students retained in later grades and the rate of referral for special education programs.

In order to gain a better understanding of current decision-making practices related to the exit of children from early childhood special education programs, and to study further current practice in

the follow-up of students leaving these programs, in-depth qualitative case studies of four programs were conducted. The selected programs were ones that varied in their approaches to screening and diagnostic assessment.

The focus of the studies was on decisions related to exit from the early childhood special education programs, as well as the follow-up procedures used in these programs. In this investigation of exit and follow-up, two general trends stand out: (a) most often the decision is made by a team of professionals or a program administrator, and (b) a program may be deemed inappropriate due to the child's age, educational gains, or the existence of more appropriate programs in the district. Each of these factors are discussed within the context of the four observed programs. Children may exit for other reasons such as relocation to another school district or parental request. Since these factors do not involve "termination of program" decisions, they will be discussed only briefly.

Method

Subjects

The four school districts that were the focus of this study differed in location, screening procedures used, diagnostic assessment procedures, and other variables. Information for the study was provided by many individuals, both from inside and outside the program. The general characteristics of the four programs are described here using fictitious community names to help readers follow the discussion.

The Maplewood program was located in a suburban school district that serves primarily a middle- to upper-middle class population (Bureau of the Census, 1982), with almost 50% of the families earning an income above $30,000. The school district serves approximately 7,000 students, only 2% of whom are minorities, in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 classes each year. Each year approximately 30 children are served by this early childhood special education program.

The Birchwood program was located in a large urban school district serving more than 35,000 pupils in grades pre-kindergarten to 12. Compared to other districts in the state, this district is at the 42nd percentile for median family income, and the 12th percentile in median age of residents (Bureau of the Census, 1982). About 38% of the residents belong to minority groups, and 45% of special education preschoolers are minorities (School District Information, 1985).[1] Within the early childhood special education program, one school serves an average of about 200 handicapped 4-year-old children in 13 classrooms over the school year. These children attend half-day sessions five days per week for up to nine months. About 90% of all handicapped preschoolers attend this school. The remaining preschoolers in the program are in three other schools, separated according to nature of handicap (physieal handicaps, hearing impaired, autism).

The Oakwood program was located in a rural school district that has a total population of approximately 6,000 people. About 94% of the families in the district are above the poverty level (Bureau of

the Census, 1982). The school district enrolls approximately 1500 pupils is pre-kindergarten through grade 12 programs each year, about 2% of whom are minorities. In the most recent academic year, 1985-86, there were 14 children enrolled in this program.

The Elmwood program was located in a suburban school district that encompasses six communities. The total district population is approximately 33,763, with 99% of its families above the poverty level (Metropolitan Council, 1985). The school district enrolls approximately 8,400 pupils in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 programs each year. In the 1985-86 academic year, 42 children were enrolled in the program.

Procedure

Four school districts with programs serving preschool age special education students were identified and asked to participate in a large scale descriptive research project. The four sites were selected to reflect a range in demographic characteristics (including community characteristics, and size of program) and in approaches to diagnostic assessment. Also, because data collection procedures required extensive contact with the sites, proximity to the research center was considered in this selection process. All sites contacted agreed to participate in the research.

One research team member was assigned to each participating district and acted as primary contact person and data collector. Typically, more than one person collected data in each site. In three of the districts, data collection took place during an eight-month

period. Due to time and travel restrictions, all data from the rural site were collected during a three-month period in the spring.

Data collection procedures included: (a) observations of meetings, classroom activities, and screening and assessment procedures, (b) extensive interviews with various staff and administrative personnel, (c) file searches, and (d) parent surveys. Although specific data collection procedures varied as a function of differences in the programs, the same research questions were asked in all sites. Detailed information describing preschool screening, diagnostic assessment procedures, the instructional programs, program exit procedures, and follow-up data on student participants was gathered for each site. (See Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Lehr, Nania, O'Sullivan, Weiss, & Bursaw, 1986, for the full descriptive reports.)

Results

Age Criteria

Results of the naturalistic study of the four programs were consistent with the survey findings (Thurlow et al., in press): a child's age is the most frequently used criterion in exit decisions. The Maplewood program historically had served primarily 4-year-old children. Approximately 90% of these children were transitioned into regular education elementary programs at the age of five. Only 10-15% spent an additional year in the early childhood special education program. Some recently implemented entrance criteria changes in this district will alter this trend. Previously, 5-year-old children needed a diagnosis of two handicapping conditions to be eligible for

the early childhood special education program. After criteria were changed, a 5-year-old with one primary handicap and one area of need could be served. Consequently, many more children qualified for an additional year of early childhood programming when exit decisions were made this spring. The staff has gained greater flexibility for making decisions based on academic and social needs rather than primarily on age criteria.

Other districts continue to emphasize age when making program termination decisions. The Birchwood program served only handicapped children who were four years old by September 1 of that academic year, unless the child was physically handicapped, hearing impaired, or autistic. The majority of students in this program exited at the end of the school year and were placed in regular education programs at the elementary level. Only about 10% continued to receive Level IV special education services after leaving the program. This program was the largest of the four studied.

The smaller, rural program that was studied (Oakwood) based approximately 75% of its exit decisions on age criteria. The majority of youngsters placed in a Level IV program continued to receive this level of service until they reached 8 years of age. However, with the exception of EBD programming, there was no other Level IV option available in this district until the secondary level.

What happens to the youngster who exceeds pre-established early childhood special education age criteria, but continues to require special education services? Our data indicated that limited

educational options for kindergarten and primary level handicapped children have significantly influenced exit decisions. Special education options for 5-year-old children in Elmwood were limited to Level II speech services or Level IV self-contained EMR or EBD programs. Kindergarten children in need of a more moderate level of special education services generally were placed in regular education and received minimal support services until they reached primary age. At this time, they could be placed in an EMR, EBD, or LD program and then could be mainstreamed into an appropriate regular education setting. In Oakwood, only EBD services were offered to handicapped elementary school students below 8 years of age. Consequently, those youngsters who continued to need special education in other areas were retained in the early childhood program until the age of eight. Obviously, the range of exit decisions that can be made is a function of the number and type of alternative placements available for graduates of early childhood special education programs. Districts must match available settings with students' needs. The ideal situation in which appropriate options exist for every potential graduate of early childhood special education is a rarity, but a worthwhile goal toward which we should strive.

Mastery of Educational Objectives

Age is not the sole criterion used to make exit decisions. Less commonly, determinations are made on the basis of the child's degree of academic growth. Mastery or nonmastery of individualized educational objectives is the yardstick for measuring achievement.

However, the four programs lacked systematic and consistent procedures for determining mastery. Some districts used standardized tests to document change. Others relied on professional judgment and group consensus. One district placed great emphasis on the sharing of observations to reach consensus. Questions addressed during the exit conferences included the following:

(1) Has the child demonstrated academic and social growth within the past year (based upon general observations)?

(2) Will the youngster be successful in a regular kindergarten program?

(3) If a child continues to require special services, will he/she profit from a mainstreaming experience at the elementary level?

(4) If a child exits before age 5, are supportive programs (such as nursery school) available?

(5) What do parents desire regarding their child's future programming?

Similar issues were brought up in the urban school district when reviewing student progress. In general, this program exited relatively few youngsters based upon mastery of IEP objectives. They offered the following reasons:

(1) Few children progress sufficiently within nine months to profit from a mainstream experience.

(2) Due to strict eligibility criteria, children tend to have severe problems that cannot be "cured" in a short time.

(3) There are limited alternative less-restrictive placements for the student who has demonstrated educational growth.

It is also rare in the Elmwood district for children to exit due to suitable gains based on age or grade. When such a situation does occur, the youngster usually exits gradually by attending a regular

kindergarten program with resource support half-days and attending the early childhood program half-days. Only about 2% exit the program and are phased out of all special services within two years.

Overall, achievement of IEP goals and evidence of educational gains play a role in exit policy, but are only considered in conjunction with other factors such as the child's age and the existence of alternative programs.

Alternative Educational Options

What happens to the youngster who has made significant improvement in the special education preschool program, but is not yet old enough to participate in the district's regular education program? This situation mainly applies to 3- and 4-year-old children. Are youngsters retained in special education until they reach kindergarten age? Are children terminated before 5 years of age, with no supportive or follow-up services? Analysis of exit data from the Maplewood district program suggests that early exits (before age 5) do occasionally occur. If the staff feels that a categorical label is no longer applicable, the child will be exited regardless of age. Generally, in these instances, a recommendation for subsequent enrollment in a community or private nursery school is made. However, although early exit decisions are made, they are the exception rather than the rule. Infrequently, children with multiple handicapping conditions have one categorical label formally removed, but continue to be served in the other areas.

Decision-Making Procedures

Significant differences were found in the ways in which exit decisions are reached. The staff in the smallest school district (Oakwood) reached consensus based on the professional judgment of all team members familiar with the child in question. Strengths and weaknesses of each youngster were outlined in writing and verbally shared. Although the staff did not present test data to supplement their observations and judgments, they appeared to have a strong sense of each child's strengths, areas of need, and potential for success in future educational environments. Each case was decided individually, with extended discussion when concensus was not immediately reached. The decision-making team consisted of the same personnel who originally assessed the youngster and carried out the intervention program. Most decisions are made in the spring, although occasionally, midyear demissions occur.

In the largest system (Birchwood), intervention teams presented assessment and pupil progress data similar to the data acquired during the assessment process. These teams may include special education professionals, the school director, and the parent(s).

Placement decisions are made at the end of the year in another district (Elmwood). Team members made decisions at meetings where the parents were present. The final decision was relayed to the program administrator who reviewed all decisions and arranged future placements for those children who exit.

There were some idiosyncratic reasons why children exited a program, other than age and progress. In Birchwood, parents would

occasionally neglect to send their child on the bus. In such cases, the parent was contacted. If the parent failed to send the child to school for 15 consecutive days, the child was dropped from the rolls and had to be readmitted. Children could leave the program midyear due to a family move, or a parental decision to enroll the child in a private program. These instances, as explained earlier, do not involve formal demission from early childhood special education programs.

Follow-Up Procedures

"Follow-up" here refers to the process of acquiring information concerning the educational status of early childhood special education "graduates." Data collected may include the following: (a) percentage of children continuing to need special education services, (b) amount, level, and types of special services provided to youngsters formerly in the programs, (c) educational and social-emotional gains made by students previously enrolled in early childhood special education, and (d) percentage of children in special education who were assessed by the preschool screening and early childhood special education staff, but not offered service. Follow-up data were collected by only two of the four districts; the information obtained was limited. Some of the follow-up procedures implemented in the districts are described here.

In Birchwood, special education procedures require that children be followed up within one year after program exit. There is no documentation of how and when these procedures are carried out.

However, descriptive information concerning a child's specific handicap, ethnicity, sex, and reason for referral are available on magnetic tape. Several years ago, a special education administrator used these computer records to track early childhood program graduates through kindergarten. It appeared that only about 20% of the early childhood graduates placed in regular kindergarten received special education services. We do not know the extent to which this rate relates to the program's belief that the special education history of its graduates should not be made known to kindergarten teachers. The idea is to protect youngsters from a situation in which expectation biases are set up by previous classification as handicapped. Occasionally follow-up services are offered to youngsters who exit from this program during the school year. Intervention team members may provide consultation to parents or agencies serving the child. In general, though, few formal attempts are made to collect longitudinal data.

Another program informally follows its graduates for one year; however, the coordinator in this district commented that the follow-up was not very good. A formal follow-up procedure is initiated only in the "rare" situation that a youngster is terminated from all special education services. At this point, a 12-month follow-up report is mandatory.

The Maplewood program followed its graduates by making one classroom visit and meeting with the new teacher during the subsequent fall quarter. However, the coordinator of this program also took the

initiative to conduct a longitudinal study of students who left the program between 1978 and 1981. Any follow-up that was done in this and the other districts was not done as a routine matter, and the results were not documented for easy access.

Discussion

The over-reliance on age criteria in the exit decision-making process increases the possibility of two types of outcomes: (a) children who may be ready for regular education are retained in the early childhood special education program longer than necessary, or (b) children are transitioned into elementary school regular or special education programs before they are prepared to handle the curriculum. Diversity in terms of the maximum age restriction can also be questioned. In some districts, students almost always are transitioned by the age of five. In other districts, 7-year-old children may still be eligible for early childhood programming, resulting in an additional two years of special education. What are the long-term consequences for children based on the age at which they exited the program? How many children have met their IEP goals at the time they reach the maximum age limit? Answers to these questions are needed to determine the impact of using a stringent age criteria to make exit decisions.

The advantage of making decisions based on the child's age are obvious. The process is and can be applied in all cases. When less formal standards are used, the decision-making process appears vague and unsystematic. For instance, when is an IEP objective mastered?

Frequently, IEPs are written in such global terminology that professional judgment, not test data, determines mastery/nonmastery of individualized goals. How will a child perform in a regular education classroom? The special education teams are not seers and can only make a "best guess" at future adjustment.

However, it is imperative not to undermine the expertise, experience, and professional concern that team members bring to every meeting. For instance, the Maplewood program relied very heavily on group consensus instead of test data. But every staff member was familiar with the child being discussed and each shared perceptions based on the child's overall performance during the course of the entire year. The time and effort extended to make individual placement decisions was commendable. But it must be recognized that this particular staff demonstrated an ability to communicate openly and honestly during the meetings. Decisions based on informal data and observations may certainly be less valid if derived from the judgment of a single professional or a team whose members did not communicate effectively. Perhaps future research projects should compare the academic and social competencies of graduates when informal decision-making processes are emphasized, versus when formalized exit criteria are applied. Also, we need to evaluate the characteristics of teams that are thorough in their data gathering, in their sharing of information, and in their ability to make decisions based on all available data.

The role of the parents must also be clarified. In most districts, parental opinions are highly valued. If parents resist a

placement decision, their desires usually are granted. In other systems, there is little parental input during the decision-making process, although of course all parents have a right to appeal a placement decision. Who is the primary consumer of the educational services, the parent or the child? If a staff member feels strongly that parent requests are inconsistent with a child's needs, what types of strategies may be appropriately applied? No educational placement will be 100% effective unless the parent understands and supports the program goals. Therefore, it is imperative that early childhood special education programs begin to develop a procedure for incorporating parent input and concerns into exit decisions.

The majority of decisions are made at the end of the school term, implying that children rarely are ready for mainstream experiences midyear. One might question the validity of this practice, especially in programs that serve 6- and 7-year-old children. Although the four programs we studied provided mainstream experiences for older children, all programs nationwide may not do so. Further, while it is easier to make transition decisions for all children in the spring when IEP goals are reviewed, this may not be consistent with individual needs. It should be pointed out that in some districts the same team members are responsible for screening and assessing referred children for providing programming to enrolled youngsters, and for carrying out periodic IEP conferences. In such a situation it is unlikely that frequent formal reassessment could occur. It might be desirable to restaff or restrucutre early childhood special education

programs to allow more time for periodic review in order to determine eligibility for early demissions. The feasibility of this approach, however, is questionable.

In conclusion, there exists a great deal of confusion concerning how and when exit decisions should be made. The ones who suffer are those youngsters who are pushed into regular education programs too early or who are retained in special education because they are too young for kindergarten. It is time to combine professional judgment with a reasonable set of exit criteria to bring some clarity to the muddled area of exit decisions.

Follow-up of students is one of the most frequently neglected responsibilities of early childhood special education programs. Two contributing factors may be the time required to collect data on individual students and the logistics involved in such a search. An attempt to collect placement data on all children who had been assessed, screened, and/or serviced by one of the programs between the years 1982 and 1985 highlighted the difficulties involved in follow-up studies. A computer listing of all children currently receiving special education services in the district was obtained. Included on this listing was information on: (a) primary handicap, (b) other handicaps, (c) number of minutes of direct service, (d) number of minutes of indirect service, (e) special education teacher, (f) size of group in which the child is instructed, and (g) supportive services (such as social work or adaptive physical education). Using this information, it was possible to assess the consistency between ECSE

classification and services and subsequent elementary special education classification and services. However, it was not possible to get a listing of graduates who were no longer receiving special services. Children not listed on the above printout may be in regular education 100% of the time or may have moved out of the district. In order to get this information, one would need to read through a printout of total school district enrollment because students are classified by number, not name. Obviously, even the most dedicated administrator does not have time to conduct such an extensive search.

In the future, school systems should consider forming data bases in such a way that longitudinal studies can be conducted with ease. Records of student progress, and of amount and type of service, need to be accurate and up-to-date. Furthermore, it is critical that school districts collect sufficient information to make determinations of special education program efficacy and of the extent to which student needs are being met. Data that only describe the amount and type of service students receive are of limited utility. School districts should be encouraged to keep track of the academic and social-emotional growth of currently served and "graduate" special education pupils. However, such an ambitious goal cannot be achieved by passing the responsibility to overworked teachers, therapists, or administrators. The goal of complete and accurate record keeping must receive priority status. Otherwise, crucial decisions will be made regarding a child's educational future with little knowledge of the likely impact of the decision.

Considerations and Guidelines

Most early childhood special education programs are at the beginning point in the process of deciding when and how to have children exit from their programs, and whether and how to collect follow-up information about them. The trends that were identified for the four early childhood special education programs point to issues that should be addressed by these programs. The following guidelines and considerations are presented to educators interested in exit and follow-up for children in early childhood special education programs.

Exit Criteria

Several basic issues must be considered in designing a justifiable exit system. The following are some key guidelines.

1. Base the exit system on some combination of age and progress, since each alone has both advantages and disadvantages.

The relative advantages and disadvantages of each approach have been highlighted in this paper. Regardless of the approach selected, the exit criteria should be justifiable and documented in print. Previous research (Thurlow et al., 1986) has shown that programs across the U.S. currently define their exit criteria in a number of ways, with very little consistency (if they define them at all). Perhaps a guiding principle should be that exit criteria be defined in terms of several factors directly tied to the child's needs. But, if this is not possible because of the size of the population served, the criteria still need to be documented.

2. Assess the educational opportunities available for special education students at the kindergarten and primary grade levels and either modify exit criteria to correspond to available programs or work to develop needed programs.

Consideration must be given to possible service options at the early elementary grade levels. While the development of needed programs is the preferred goal, that approach is not always possible. And, it frequently is not feasible to seek appropriate services that are located too far away. The problem of needs and services must be recognized and dealt with as best possible.

3. Develop procedures for parent/guardian input to exit decision-making process.

The need for parent input into special education decision making at various levels (both age/grade and severity of handicap) has been noted (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Gilliam & Coleman, 1981; Goldstein & Turnbull, 1982; Lynch & Stein, 1982; McKinney & Hocutt, 1982; Soloman, Wilson, & Galey, 1982). It is virtually taken as a "given" that parent input is needed for young children. Yet, very limited procedures currently exist for ensuring that such input in obtained. Further, programs need to consider how best to obtain the input and the desired nature of the input that is obtained.

Follow-Up Procedures

Early childhood special education programs also must attend to follow-up issues. Follow-up is useful not only for checking the efficacy of a program but also for getting information that can influence the goals and procedures of programs. Two key guidelines have been identified for developing a follow-up system.

1. Define the goals of the follow-up system.

Ideally, a follow-up system should enable a program to obtain information on educational outcomes for students after they have left a program. At a minimum, a program would want to document the nature of services students receive after leaving the early childhood special education program. It would be beneficial to know also whether students were able to function successfully in the context of those services. A myriad of goals for information is possible. They must be defined and assessed as to their feasibility.

2. Identify and establish the specific procedures that will be used to actually follow students.

Effective follow-up rarely occurs unless it has been planned for ahead of time and initiated prior to the time when the student leaves the program. A system for tracking students after they have left is essential.

Because of the increased mobility of families today, it usually is necessary to set up a system that monitors student location on a yearly basis, even if data are not to be collected yearly. The extent to which this is necessary may vary with the community. Our case studies have suggested that the need probably is greatest in the urban setting and smallest in the rural setting.

In addition to the procedures for finding students, an effective follow-up system also needs a well-defined methodology -- one that collects data that can be used (for both reporting and influencing program policy decisions). Ideally, the same data would be obtained over time so that trends could be examined.

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Footnote

[1]School District Information sources included a special education preschool program handbook (1984), a school district annual report (1985) and student statistical report (1985), and a brochure (1985) about learning opportunities for preschoolers in the school district.

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Early Childhood Assessment Project
University of Minnesota

No. 1 Preschool screening in Minnesota: 1982-83 by M. L. Thurlow, J. E. Ysseldyke, & P. O'Sullivan (August, 1985).

No. 2 Current screening and diagnostic practices for identifying young handicapped children by J. E. Ysseldyke, M. L. Thurlow, P. O'Sullivan, & R. A. Bursaw (September, 1985).

No. 3 Instructional decision-making practices of teachers of preschool handicapped children by J. E. Ysseldyke, P. A. Nania, & M. L. Thurlow (September, 1985).

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